

Augustus and Livia: an extraordinary marriage

Rebecca Langlands

In 2014, the 2000th anniversary of his death, Augustus has been stealing the limelight. But Augustus wasn't a one-man band – the creation of the Roman principate and of the culture of Augustan Rome was a joint effort in which one of Augustus' most important partners was his wife Livia. Rebecca Langlands explores Augustus' relationship with the woman beside the throne.

In ancient Rome divorce was easy and common, especially among the elite. Powerful men swapped wives and married off their children to new partners as easily as we move house, in order to align themselves with leading families and forge political alliances. The emperor Augustus was married twice by the time he was twenty-two, both times for reasons of political strategy. Yet Augustus' third marriage at the age of twenty-four, to the gorgeous and intriguing Livia, endured more than fifty years, until his death, and weathered the most extraordinary political, social, and personal upheavals, including the complete transformation of the Roman political system. What was the secret of their long-lasting marriage?

Livia's popular image

Thanks to the vivid portrayal in Tacitus' *Annals*, we tend to picture Livia in her later years, after her long marriage to the most powerful man in Rome, now surviving him to take on a new role: the mother of the new emperor, Tiberius. We think of her as a domineering matriarch, interfering and machinating behind the scenes, not dissimilar from Maggie Smith's character, the Dowager Countess Violet, in the TV series *Downton Abbey*. She is represented as power-hungry and ruthless, manipulating her male relatives in order to exercise the imperial power that was officially denied her as a woman. Not only does she promote the interests of her favourites, but there are also hints and rumours that she murders those who stand in her way.

But back in the summer of 39 B.C., when Livia and Augustus first met, she was a pregnant teenager and he was still 'Octavian', a young man on the make in

his early twenties. Neither of them could have predicted the extraordinary future that lay ahead of them. Both were married to other people and expecting children with their current partners. Their relationship was scandalous, and it all happened scandalously fast. So what was it that drew them together, in the face of significant obstacles and public disapproval? Was it love at first sight, crazed lust, or canny political manoeuvring? And what kept them together for so many years?

Livia's background

On her father's side Livia came from one of the most illustrious old families of Rome, the Claudii. In 43 B.C., at the age of fifteen, she was married to a well-born, clean-living relative, Tiberius Nero (a great statesman; Cicero approved of him, and had been keen for him to marry his own daughter). Their first child – the future emperor Tiberius – was born the following year. But the next few years of civil war were a time of terror and uncertainty for the new family. Livia's father committed suicide after the battle of Philippi and her husband also chose the losing side, forcing the family to spend years on the run. Once, in Naples, they were almost betrayed by the crying of baby Tiberius as the enemy burst in, or so Suetonius claims in his *Life of Tiberius*. Another story holds that, as they were fleeing by night in Greece, Livia only narrowly escaped with her life when they were trapped in a forest fire, and her clothes and hair caught alight. By the time she was nineteen, she had already suffered her share of harrowing experiences.

An amnesty finally allowed Livia and her family to return to Rome in the late summer of 39 B.C., and it was then that she first set eyes on Octavian. Within weeks

Livia had moved in with him on the Palatine. They immediately planned to marry, despite the fact that she was heavily pregnant by her husband, and both needed to divorce their spouses. (Octavian had recently married Scribonia and was expecting a child by her; their baby Julia was born the day the divorce came through.) After disentangling themselves from these marriages, they married in January the following year, just after Livia had given birth to Drusus.

Over-determined sexual attractions

It is easy to see why Livia might have been attracted to Octavian. At twenty-three he was much closer to her own age than her husband, who was already in his forties, yet he had already achieved so much. He was one of the most powerful men in Rome, defeating his enemies with a combination of military and political prowess. Ancient writers such as Virgil and Suetonius also describe him as strikingly good-looking and well-built, with wavy golden hair and remarkable flashing eyes – though describing him in this way was also a way of emphasizing his divine power as emperor (and Suetonius provides in addition less flattering details: he was short and sometimes limped, and his body was covered in spots, birthmarks, and callouses caused by his constant scratching). According to Suetonius, again, Octavian enjoyed it when people claimed to be dazzled by his glance and had to look away, and we can imagine a charismatic player keen to take centre stage and deliberately cultivating his image to command respect and awe.

Livia herself was also a catch: outstandingly beautiful, her ability to deal with the trauma of her years as a young mother and refugee suggests an appealing strength of character to match Octavian's own. In addition, there is no doubt that marriage to Livia, with her family connections and noble status, enhanced Octavian's social standing.

Subsequent gossip painted a picture of a lust-crazed Augustus dragging the pregnant, dishevelled Livia away from her husband, and mocked him for trying to get the high priests in Rome to bend the laws

that prevented a pregnant woman from remarrying. This unseemly haste was also characterized by Augustus' critics (particularly his rival Mark Antony who spread all kinds of rumours about him) as the action of a power-crazed tyrant, grabbing whatever he wanted from other men just because he could.

However, like the celebrity tabloid scandals of today, such depictions of the love affair between Livia and Augustus were as much about critiquing power, mud-slinging among political rivals, and the enduring desire to collect salacious stories about our public figures, as they were about the reality of their marriage.

And what are we to make of Suetonius' most shocking claim about the couple (*Life of Augustus* 71), that, when they were both much older, Livia used to find young girls for the elderly Augustus to have sex with, after he developed a taste for deflowering virgins? In its characterization of Augustus (now with fading sexual potency) helping himself to his subjects' daughters, this gossip also draws on the theme, common in Roman political invective, of the political tyrant as sexual predator (think of the rape of Lucretia). But from a twenty-first-century perspective, this grim rumour also casts an odd light on Livia; it is jarring for us to imagine a powerful and strong-minded woman colluding with her husband's sexual abuse like this, and we may prefer to think of this as another of the rumour-mill's exaggerations.

The official version

Our attempts to get to know the real Livia are also hindered by the representations of the other side, the monstrous PR machine of Augustus' imperial household, which rolled into action once Augustus had attained the position of leader (*princeps*) in Rome.

During the period of his rule Augustus instigated a vast programme of moral, legal, and social reform, including laws regulating marriage. As part of this programme he was keen to promote himself and other family members as models of virtue to inspire and guide his people, and so Livia was characterized in public representations as the ideal wife and mother, the epitome of the virtuous Roman matron: faithful and chaste, cultivating old-fashioned virtues, dignified and a loyal supporter of her husband – supposedly she even made his clothes for him at home with her own hands.

One year, during festivals devoted to gods of marriage and women, Livia dedicated a magnificent shrine to the deity of happy marriages *Concordia* (Harmony), in celebration of marriage as a harmonious partnership between husband and wife; it was a public declaration of the strength of

their marriage, offering it as an example for others to follow. For centuries after her death Livia was seen as a kind of patron goddess of marriage, and in Roman Egypt wedding ceremonies were carried out in front of her statue, to benefit from her divine blessing.

The poet Ovid, languishing in exile on the Black Sea after sexual scandals of his own, urged his wife to take Livia as her role-model, describing her as a paragon 'who demonstrates in her own virtue that the good old days cannot match up to our own age in the praise of sexual virtue, who, with the beauty of Venus and the bearing of Juno, is the only woman worthy to share the divine bed of Augustus' (Ovid, *Poems from the Black Sea*, 3.1.114–16). Desperate to be allowed to return to Rome, he was flattering Augustus and buying into the imperial line. Writing in the reign of her son, Tiberius, the historian Velleius Paterculus also called Livia 'an absolutely outstanding woman, more like a goddess than a human being'.

The tragic death of Livia's younger son Drusus, in a horse-riding accident in Germany in 9 B.C. at the age of only twenty-nine, gave a further occasion for admiration and praise of her strength of character. Devastated by his loss, she is said to have turned to the philosopher Areus for counselling, and he taught her to master her grief and stand strong. Later, when he was consoling their mutual friend Marcia on the death of her own son, the philosopher Seneca advised her to model herself upon Livia (Seneca, *Consolation to Marcia* 3.1–2).

A cold fish or lifelong love?

Such depictions of Livia make her seem impressive, but for a modern reader they are also alienating; she seems unreal and untouchable, lacking human warmth, like the stone statues that portray her likeness. Perhaps the traumatic events of her teenage years had indeed toughened her up. Perhaps the passionate affair of their youth had grown over the years into something more pragmatic. It doesn't help that Suetonius tells us (*Life of Augustus* 84) that Augustus wrote preparatory notes before all his conversations – including those with Livia! This intriguing detail paints a picture of a marriage lacking spontaneity and warmth, although Suetonius makes it clear that this was only the case for the most important conversations.

Whatever the case, Suetonius also tells us Livia was still at the forefront of Augustus' mind even on his deathbed. In fact, he died in the middle of kissing her, after addressing to her his very last words: 'Goodbye Livia, and remember our marriage!' (*Life of Augustus* 99). What was the nature of the marriage that he was

asking her to remember? Was it loving, passionate, and intimate, or a façade maintained for the sake of political expediency? We will never know for sure, and the secrets of their long marriage have died with them. What we do know is that they were a power couple whose marriage made a deep impression on their contemporaries, who shaped a dynasty and a political system, and left an extraordinary legacy of empire and intrigue.

Rebecca Langlands is spending a year doing research in California but will be back at the University of Exeter teaching Latin literature and Roman culture from autumn 2015.